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Slavery and Cattle in East and West Texas

BY DEBBIE LILES

When Ulrich B. Phillips first reported on the institution of slavery in the South, he put forth the notion that the planter was the most dominant being in the region and that cotton was the most valued commodity. During the twentieth century, the history of the South was influenced by many of the ideas found in Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* and *Life and Labor in the Old South*, which stressed that those men who owned plantations, owned large numbers of slaves, and grew vast quantities of cotton were at the top of southern society. By doing this he, and other scholars, minimized the importance of the yeoman farmer, who may have only owned a few slaves, and the contribution of other industries, such as livestock, to the southern economy.¹

Challenged to prove otherwise, Frank L. Owsley wrote about the importance of the yeoman farmers in *Plain Folk of the Old South*. Owsley strove to give credit to those people that Phillips had essentially written off. He made it clear that the plain folk were a successful component of southern society, and that their contribution through the cattle industry had been vastly underestimated. Many of these plain folk were small slave owners, and up to sixty percent owned one to five slaves, while many others owned between five and ten. Many of these men also owned small parcels of land from fifty to 300 acres.²

In 1961, Eugene D. Genovese argued that cattle had no value in the Old South, that planters did not have the extra money to invest in better stock, and indeed, why should they with little way to recover their investment? He also pushed the notion that slaves were incompetent cattle handlers who regularly abused and neglected the stock. He stated that, "the prevailing inefficient labor force and the backward business practices prevented all except a few unusual planters from accomplishing much," in the livestock industry.³

More than any one person, Fredrick Jackson Turner was responsible for cultivating the concept of a frontier and for the notion that herders moved westward as part of a series of typical steps. His paper at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition forever meshed the image of cattle and the frontier. According to Turner, herders were preceded by hunters and trappers, and followed by farmers. His visual: "Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the

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pioneer farmer... Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later, and see the same procession."⁴ But his cattle-raiser scenario was missing one vital component that is present in the property tax records – slaves.

Amidst all the different theories about frontier development are two common factors: open-range ranching due to lack of fencing, and a shortage of available labor. The origin of open-range ranching includes multiple contributions from European, African, and Iberian practices and can all be applied to Texas, as the influence from all aforesaid regions undoubtedly had an influence.⁵ Among the multiple benefits of the open-range technique are cattle who essentially manage themselves by free grazing on open land. Indeed, the main supervision livestock required was in preparation for market. The question of how to provide man-power to round-up and drive said livestock could be answered using slaves, alongside free labor.

The adaptability of slave labor is important in the overall conversation about the peculiar institution for many reasons. To contribute to the discussion of the Needless War theory, Charles W. Ramsdell wrote an article in 1929 entitled "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion." Ramsdell proposed that slavery would not continue to exist west of the Cross Timbers in Northwestern Texas because plantation agriculture could not survive there due to the semi-arid conditions that existed in the region. He mentioned the "few small cattle ranches" that existed on the northwestern frontier, but stated that said cattle was more of a nuisance than an economic opportunity, as it could not be contained without barbed wire, which was not yet invented. By doing this, he continued down the U. B. Phillips road supposing that the major economic use of slaves was for the production of cotton.⁶

Was cotton really the dominant economic product of the South? According to the 1860 census, southern livestock was "worth half a billion dollars – more than twice the value of that year's cotton crop."⁷ Cattle, not cotton, was the number one agricultural business. In their article, "The Antebellum Southern Herdsman: A Reinterpretation," Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney explained that the lack of research into the value of the cattle industry in the Old South can be connected to historians who build on previous scholarship. This rewriting of the past reproduces a basic idea with added twists and turns until a new "groundbreaking" idea comes along. It rests on the shoulders of the pioneers in the industry. To be fair, Phillips did mention the importance of bacon in a slave's diet, but he did not expand on the importance of stockowners or the roles of slavery in the stock industry. Owsley expanded on the importance of cattle and the role of the plain folk, but failed to connect the importance of slavery to the success of his topic. Genovese missed the mark on the value of cattle, the importance of open-range ranching, and the value of slaves as herdsman. The only study that has examined

the importance of both cattle and the contribution made by slaves was Terry Jordan's *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching*.⁸

Jordan's studies of the livestock industry included many contributions, such as the observation that many cattle owners used "black laborers" as cowboys. He wrote that "no positive or negative correlation existed between slave ownership and cattle ownership ... In other words, the herds of cattle ranging the prairies were not simply the property of wealthy plantation owners ... [but also]...slaveless stockraisers." However, Jordan's study of Northeastern Texas does show a correlation – that slave ownership and raising cattle were more often paired than not. He stated that thirty-eight percent of all persons who reported owning 100 head of cattle or more did not own slaves. One observation with this number is that it infers that unless a person owned a slave, they did not use slave labor. It does not account for the possibility that slaves could be hired, or that relatives and neighbors with slaves often helped each other. That aside, Jordan did not look at the basic fact that while thirty-eight percent of cattle owners did not own slaves, sixty-two percent did.⁹ Jordan fell into the historiographical trap that had been laid by others. He looked to measure the success of slavery as it related to the cattle industry by measuring the ratio of cattle to slaves in *only* those who owned twenty slaves or more, but saw none. These planters made up twenty percent of the sixty-two percent that owned cattle, but what about the remaining forty-two percent?

Using Jordan's figures, this forty-two percent of slave and cattle owners are the very definition of Owsley's small slaveholding plain-folk. Most of these people in Jordan's study of Northeast Texas, and in tax records from Southeast and Northwest Texas, owned between one and ten slaves. An interesting example of this can be seen using a specific cattleman that Jordan mentioned to support his argument. He stated that Meredith Hart was not a slave owner from 1837 to 1850, but that he owned 1,000 head of cattle. Hart, who lived in either Hunt or Fannin County at the time, is Jordan's example of no correlation between cattle and slaves. However, Hart shows up in 1856 in Johnson County with five slaves. At this point, it is not known how he came to own said slaves, only that he did. Not only did Hart expand his landowning status within a few years of living in Johnson County, but his total number of cattle and slaves owned from 1856 to 1864 grew alongside each other: by 1864, his herd was valued at \$12,980 and he owned eight slaves – up from five slaves and \$8,080 in horses and cattle. Until a survey of the Fannin and Hunt County records is examined for slave hire contracts, it is impossible to state that Hart did not use slave labor in any way before he came to Johnson County, but he certainly did after. Additionally, after he moved, the total numbers of both his cattle and slave holdings far surpassed

the 1,000 head he owned in Jordan's study of the years before he owned slaves.¹⁰

Hart's ownership of only five to eight slaves to handle a herd ranging from 1,100 to 4,500 head introduces another point. As already stated, the general accepted image of the money crop for Texas slaveowners is cotton and, because of this association, it is believed that the more slaves a person owned, the more income he could generate. But what if his money crop was cattle? What if – in a location where cattle roamed free for the taking, essentially fed itself, reproduced itself, and then walked itself to market with minimal guidance – what if an owner only needed a handful of slaves? Should there be a new definition of “rancher” versus “planter” status? This would eliminate the small slaveholding plain folk status, and assume that cattle raisers with less than twenty slaves actually chose to own less than their planter equals, rather than assuming that they did not have the means, or the need, for larger holdings – thus making them less worthy.¹¹

Before making a decision on this new “rancher” term, some guidelines would have to be drawn. These would give the number of slaves required to a certain number of the total livestock owned by a person. This will be difficult as livestock in a successful and well run operation was constantly being driven to some form of market. Did people under-declare their stock holdings, or run them down for the annual inventory count for tax purposes? Many cows were undoubtedly pregnant at the first of the year and would calve out in the early spring, adding to the total number in a herd. Not all slaves a possible rancher owned would be directly contributing to the cattle operation, but one could argue the same of a cotton plantation. As it is not the intention of this paper to conclusively provide the guidelines for a new term defining wealth and success as it relates to the cattle industry, this conversation will continue elsewhere, but before it does, examples that support the thought should be given.

In his study of slavery in Liberty (and Chambers) County, Ronald D. Traylor concluded that, like many frontier regions with limited available transportation to markets, the main industry was livestock. Despite the fact that the percentage of slaves within the population corresponded with counties around it that were dominated by plantation economy, Liberty County was not included in the general discussion of slavery. Traylor questioned this and began his study with a meeting with the Assistant Clerk of the Court, who told him, “Honey, slavery was not important in Liberty County during those times.” Much like the Northwestern region, the raw number of slaves owned in the county was deemed too low to be included in plantation studies and not high enough to warrant further research.¹²

Before it became Liberty County in 1834, (and later divided into

Chambers County in 1858), the area was part of the Atascosito District. Prior to this it had been inhabited by numerous native Indians (Orcoquisac, Karankawa, and Coushatta); was inhabited by Americans, French, and Spanish around the time of the Louisiana Purchase; was part of the Joseph B. Vehlein grant in 1826; and was then transferred to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company in 1830. Settlers in the area brought or bought slaves and, “without exception, every settler identified as a farmer or stockman [in 1827] owned slaves.” These initial cattlemen owned less than five slaves each.¹³

By 1850, there were seven planters in Liberty County, including one who owned fifty-one slaves, but eighty percent of the slaveholders owned ten or less. Crop production was still minimal but growing, with a total of 331 bales of cotton produced by only six of 199 listed farmers, and 6,692 bushels of rice.¹⁴ The number of slave owners had grown from fifty-two in 1840 to 125 in 1850, but traditional crops associated with plantation style agriculture did not. Instead, Liberty County’s plain folk chose to invest in cattle – up from 14,058 in 1840 to 45,670 in 1850.¹⁵

Liberty County slaves contributed to cattlemen’s success. Not only did they help prepare cattle before they went to market, but they raised the crops used to feed both the livestock and humans the rest of the time. Cattle and slaves were also a commodity that could be traded to the benefit of the owner. In 1843, William B. Duncan, a Liberty County cattleman, recorded in his diary that he traded thirty-one head of cattle for a slave while he was on a drive to Natchez. His cattle sold for between seven and nine dollars each, which made the slave worth between \$217 and \$279. Another observation was made by Jacob Branch, whose master lived near Beaumont and engaged in the livestock business. In his slave narrative, recorded by WPA workers during the Great Depression, Branch recalled the large livestock operation that his master owned, and that profits generated from selling hogs and cowhides supplied the money to buy more slaves.¹⁶ In Liberty County, small slave holding plain folk opted to raise livestock over plantation style crops to build their net worth.

More specific examples can be given about “ranchers” in the Northwestern section of Texas. This section is defined as from Johnson County north to the Red River and from Tarrant County over to the 100th meridian – essentially the region described by Ramsdell as where slavery would have ended without the Civil War, as a plantation/slave economy could not exist.

This section is one that is generally identified more by its history after the war than before. Aside from it being the home of Fort Worth – Cowtown – it was also the home of many famous cattlemen who made names for

themselves as cattle barons and trail riders. Oliver Loving, John Chisum, C.C. Slaughter, A.D. Kennard, Daniel Waggoner, and dozens more were all slave owners. Before the era of famous cattle drives north after the war, they established themselves within their communities as successful cattle ranchers who owned small numbers of slaves. Many provided the Confederacy with livestock, others supplied the Union, some did both. Whoever the customer, the motive of profit was surely always the goal.

When it came to business reasons for owning slaves, their cost had to be cheaper than hired labor to be profitable. To determine if a slave was profitable one must look at the rates of return. "A 'reasonably profitable investment' means at least a 6 percent annual return on capital – the average rate of return on other forms of investment" during many of the antebellum years.¹⁷ In his study on the profitability of slaves as a source of labor in business, Robert S. Starobin posed the question, "... if slavery was not economically viable, would not slaveholders have abandoned their 'peculiar institution'?" Was a bloody civil war necessary if slavery was dying of its own weight."¹⁸ He concluded that slaves were cheaper to both own and hire to work than free labor. The initial cost of a slave, if there was one, and his maintenance could be justified as a few years wages (approximately \$300 per annum), but with the additional benefit of appreciation, use as collateral for loans, and the reproductive factor, slaves were significantly less expensive in the work force, and often more productive.¹⁹

Perhaps one of the clearest example of the use and profitability of slave labor as it related to the cattle industry was Denton County's John Simpson Chisum:

Year	Land	\$	Slave	\$	Horse	\$	Cattle	\$	LIOC	\$	Loc.
1855	-	-	-	-	6	300	-	-	-	-	-
1856	160	240	-	-	7	350	-	-	-	-	-
1856 Chisum and Fowler	320	480	-				140	9,800			
1857	940	1,720	-	-	5	300	1,500	10,500	-	-	-
1858	970	3,320	-	-	8	480	2,500	17,500	-	-	-
1859	970	3,160	4	2,000	17	765	4,000	28,000	725	2,650	Lamar
1860	970	3,450	6	4,200	18	720	5,000	35,000	575	1,200	Lamar
1861	970	3,450	7	4,800	14	630	6,500	39,00	Not listed		
1862	970	3,450	7	4,400	13	630	7,960	39,700	675	1,550	Lamar
1864	1801	8,122	13	8,000	Not itemized			65,900	929	2,332	Lamar

Chisum never attained planter status, which would mean that Jordan would have overlooked him for any correlation in his records. He never owned more than thirteen slaves, but it is evident that he chose to increase his slaveholdings as his livestock numbers grew. He did not go into the cattle business until he was about thirty years old. Before that, he worked as a contractor for several buildings, which included the construction of the courthouse in Paris; made money hauling water into town; sold groceries, and apprenticed as a store clerk. He made an unsuccessful run at County Clerk in 1850, followed by a successful attempt in 1852, but this life held little promise of the riches he sought. After his two year term as County Clerk, Chisum moved to Denton County and went into the cattle business with Stephen K. Fowler. Fowler put up \$6,000 for a ten year partnership (which made him a cool \$50,000 in a few years). Chisum traveled to Colorado County where he purchased 1,200 head of cattle, some already pregnant with calves, for six dollars each.²⁰

Much of the early cattle from Texas went to New Orleans. It is believed that there were two main routes in Texas, the first "drained central and eastern Texas; the cattle crossed the Sabine en route to Shreveport, Natchitoches, or Alexandria, Louisiana, where they were shipped down the Red and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans." This was the least preferred method, as the price of shipping cattle down river from Shreveport was expensive and reportedly varied from five to six dollars a head in 1850 and seven dollars in 1859. The second route was used by western and southern ranchers, who drove their cattle through the aforementioned Liberty County, then to Beaumont, over the Sabine, Calcasieu, and Mississippi rivers and on to New Orleans. Once in New Orleans, cattle was sold for between ten and twenty-five dollars a head during the antebellum years, which quickly rose to thirty-five a head when the war started. If cattle were transported down river, this would net the owner a profit of between approximately thirty to fifty percent, more if they traveled overland.²¹

Seeing the need to obtain beef for the troops, the Confederate Congress not only extended exemptions for stockmen in 1862, but they also exempted a man for every 500 head of cattle in a herd. By 1863, Confederate agents were authorized to purchase cattle for twenty-two dollars a head if the government had to round them up, and twenty-five if they were gathered for them. Payment for these transactions was in Confederate currency. Federal troops also needed beef, and by June 1864 were out-paying the Confederacy with prices ranging from forty to sixty dollars per head. Added to the vast difference in price, the Feds were also willing to purchase Texas cattle with gold, which retained its value during and after the war, unlike Confederate scrip.²²

One statement to the success of slavery in the cattle industry is actually one that refers to growing cotton. One cannot discuss slavery in Texas without mentioning Randolph B. Campbell, who stated that "most of the planters and farmers who produced cotton with slave labor profited from their investments. One obvious piece of evidence supporting this claim," he wrote, "is the way that they continued to pour money into slaves and land. Few people can afford to invest year after year in unprofitable ventures." Campbell estimated that these slaveowners were earning returns of more than six percent in 1850 and 1860, or roughly the same as they would receive if they invested their money in business loans (which other sources list from ten to forty percent), and that Texas could "only nod in assent...when spokesmen of the Old South said 'Cotton is King.'"²³

This same argument can be offered up for cattle raisers who owned slaves. Slaveholders property tax records show how they added slaves and cattle to their inventory with regularity, and that they seemed to have chosen to not elevate their slaveholding numbers to those of planters. Prices obtained for cattle far exceeded the six percent required to justify slave labor, easily ranging from thirty-five percent and higher (especially when the livestock reproduced, as it generally did). When the war ended, planters lost much of their worth when their slaves were freed, whereas "ranchers" did not have as much invested in their bondsmen. Additionally, many of the cattlemen who traded with the Federal forces had a form of specie that held its value, not to mention herds of cattle that only became more valuable after the war. With all due respect to Philips, Genovese, Owsley, Ramsdell, and even Campbell, slave ownership as it related to the cattle industry needs to be reexamined, along with how regions that were not suited to plantation economy adapted the use of slaves to other industries such as livestock.

Before closing it is important to revisit Ramsdell and Chisum. Ramsdell believed that slavery would cease to exist west of the Cross Timbers due to the fact that it was not good for plantation economy. This study has shown that the livestock industry, which continued to move westward after the Civil War, offered a profitable alternative to plantation economy. Chisum was successful in Denton County, but it was not until he moved to New Mexico in the late 1860s, and was the founder of a large scale cattle ranching operation that covered sixteen hundred sections of land, that he truly established himself. There is no doubt that if the peculiar institution had not ended with the Civil War, he, and many others, would have taken it far west of the Cross Timbers of Texas.

ENDNOTES

¹ Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "The Antebellum Southern Herdsman: A Reinterpretation," *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 2 (May 1975):148-149.

² Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 7-8.

³ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 117.

⁴ Terry G. Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 4.

⁵ Jordan, *Trails to Texas*, 4.

⁶ Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16 (1929), 155-57.

⁷ McDonald and McWhiney, "The Antebellum Southern Herdsman," 147.

⁸ McDonald and McWhiney, "The Antebellum Southern Herdsman," 148-149; Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*; Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*; Jordan, *Trails to Texas*.

⁹ Jordan, *Trails to Texas*, 98.

¹⁰ Jordan, *Trails to Texas*, 98; Johnson County Tax Rolls, 1856-1865.

¹¹ This is the topic of the author's dissertation, "Southern Roots, Western Foundations: The Peculiar Institution and the Cattle Industry in Northwestern Texas, 1849-1864."

¹² Ronald D. Traylor, "Liberty and Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Liberty (and Chambers) County, Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*, 49, no.1 (Spring 2011):109-134, quote from 110.

¹³ Traylor, "Liberty and Slavery," 111-112, quote from 112.

¹⁴ Traylor, "Liberty and Slavery," 119.

¹⁵ Traylor, "Liberty and Slavery," 118-121; Diana J. Kleiner, "LIBERTY COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online* <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hcl08> (accessed September 25, 2012). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹⁶ Traylor, "Liberty and Slavery," 117, 121-122, quote from 122; "Jacob Branch," available at http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ewyatt/_borders/Texas%20Slave%20Narratives/TEXAS%20B/Branch,%20Jacob.html (accessed September 1, 2012). "He was a great one for to raise pigs. He sell sometime 500 hawgs at one time. He tek he dogs and drive dem hawgs 'cross the Neches Riber all by hisse'f to sell dem. Dat's how he git de money to buy he niggers, selling hawgs and cowhides."

¹⁷ Robert S. Starobin, "The Economics of Industrial Slavery in the Old South," *The Business History Review* 44, no.2 (Summer, 1970): 133.

¹⁸ Starobin, "The Economics of Industrial Slavery in the Old South," 131.

¹⁹ Starobin, "The Economics of Industrial Slavery in the Old South," 141.

²⁰ Clifford R. Caldwell, *John Simpson Chisum: The Cattle King of the Pecos Revisited* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2010), 35, 38, 40.

²¹ David G. Surdam, "The Antebellum Texas Cattle Trade across the Gulf of Mexico," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 100 (August 1997): 478, 490.

²² Surdam, "The Antebellum Texas Cattle Trade across the Gulf of Mexico," 486-491.

²³ Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), first and second quotes from 210; Meyer Weinberg, *A Short History of American Capitalism*, Chapter 5, available at <http://www.newhistory.org/CH05.htm> (accessed September 5, 2012).